

Machinery and Calligraphy in Mounir Fatmi's Art

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ABSTRACT: This paper studies the relationship between modernity and cultural heritage in a globalized world through the work of contemporary Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi (b. 1970), titled *Modern Times-A History of The Machine* (2010), *Speed City* (2010) and *Technologia* (2010). The paper looks specifically at how Fatmi's artwork understands modernity in the Arab world as hinted at by the inclusion of Arabic calligraphy by way of cultural reference. The machinery can be regarded as the Western project for modernism accompanied by industrialization. The Arab world and the Middle East in this discussion are used interchangeably. The paper shows how Fatmi's artwork highlights the relationship between the industrialized West and the fast growing and urbanized East. Thus, calligraphy in Fatmi's work can be viewed as traditional as well as contemporary; therefore, cultural heritage, in part, also defines modernity.

KEYWORDS: Modernity, calligraphy, contemporary art, painting and drawing, cultural heritage, machines.

1 INTRODUCTION

Mounir Fatmi the Moroccan artist who lives and works between Paris, France, and Tangier, Morocco, combines two realms within his art: the industrial and spiritual (Fatmi, M., 2015). Fatmi's practice of combining the two realms can be traced back to the after colonization, at a time when Arab intellectuals in the Middle East and North Africa were advancing an Arab project to transition to modernity, as opposed to the Western renaissance, in which a moral and ethical future stem from religion, and a material future stems from the modern secular world (Di-Capua, Y., 2015).

The paper discusses how his inclusion of the saw blades to hint at industrialization and modernism, combined with the repetitive and harmonic addition of Arabic calligraphy, poetic scripts and spiritual verses present an understanding of modernity in the Arab world, and possibly in the context of al *maghrib al-'arabīy* (المغرب العربي 'the Arab Maghreb') or North Africa.

2 THE PAPER QUESTION

What is the relationship between modernity and cultural heritage in the Middle east? Who is the subject of the struggle against the machine in the modern world? Where does Fatmi place the subject of struggle in this piece?

2.1 MODERN TIMES—A HISTORY OF THE MACHINE

This piece is a large-scale video installation of projected images of calligraphy, systems of cogs, movement and architecture. The title is inspired by Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times*, (1936) where Chaplin plays Little Tramp, a lowly assembly line worker in a factory. This film highlights the struggle of the life of this worker against the machines of the modern world (Fatmi, M., 2012). The static circular calligraphic designs are made to circulate and resemble the movement of the cogs. Some of the words are Quranic verses, such as *Bism Allah Al-rahman Al-raheem*. Others, such as *Al-kafi*, *Alshafi*, *Almughni*, are three of the ninety-nine attributes of *Allah*; in which they mean, respectively, the sufficient, the healer and the enricher. The name Mohammed, also, repeats in a way that resembles the Sufi practice of repeating. A practice spread widely throughout North Africa where Fatmi is from. However, the phrases are not meant to be readable. Instead, is to add the specificity of this Middle-

eastern context. The calligraphic phrases are dissimulated in the machine and disappear within the structure of the projection. The provocative juxtapositions of the imagery as well as the indication of struggle against the machine in modern world (hinted by the title of Chaplin's movie) invited the viewer to tackle ideas of industrialization and individualism. The subject of struggle in Fatmi's art, as opposed to the little worker from Chaplin's movie, is this paper's investigation.

If *Modern Times-A History of The Machine* is considered in terms of power relations, then who is vulnerable in Fatmi's art and who is powerful? How does the projected image of vulnerability on either the architecture or the calligraphy affects the way in which we read modernity in the Arab world? How does the advent of machinery intersect with the project of modernity in the Middle East? The calligraphy against the machines can also be read not as a representation of power; i.e., a machine can be a powerful tool that can be used either to construct or deconstruct (Croutch, M., 2011). Calligraphy can easily be read as a source of human knowledge or as a mechanism that can, also, construct or deconstruct.

Fatmi's work also questions the speed of industrialization and the effect of consumer culture on modernization. In an interview with Utku, Fatmi said, "I would define a megalopolis in regard to the speed and rapidity of architectural development in cities without taking time to consider or reflect upon the well-being of the people who live in the city," (Utku, H., 2011). Fatmi further criticized the machine of capital for its exploitation of cheap labor and resources, which has resulted in an unequal distribution of goods.

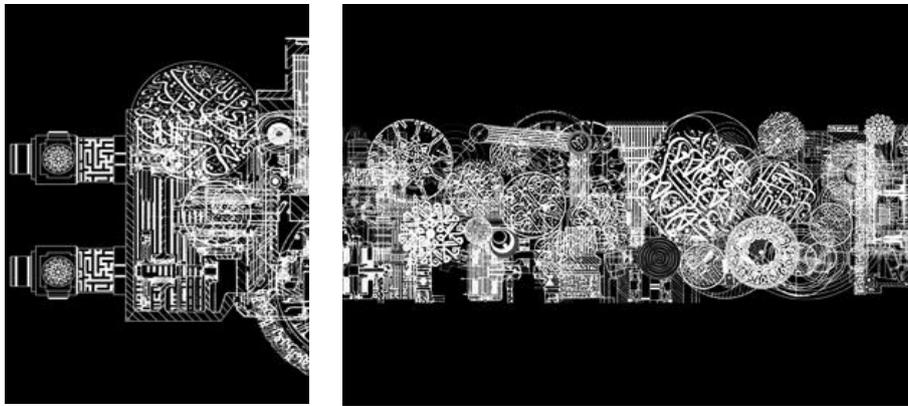


Fig. 1. *Modern Times: A History of The Machine, 2010, France, video installation, 15 minutes, HD, B&W, stereo. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johanseburg @ Adagp, Paris, 2021*

Wallerstein better explains the modern world system and capitalism by using the terms: the core and periphery. He stated: "In the 'core' of the system, the dominant classes were supported by strong states as they exploited labor, resources and trade opportunities, most notably in 'peripheral' areas," (Wallerstein, I., 2010). Not considering the wellbeing of the people can be understood in the lack of sufficient institutionalization and civic engagement in the periphery world. However, within this transition to modernism, which permeates the Arab world, Fatmi recognizes the effect of modernization in regard to reflecting local issues that speak to global issues as well through his art.

After examining aspects of modernity, critics not only discredited the notion of the unilinear progress from tradition to modernity in favor of cultural particularity, but also demanded "to move beyond the unilinear narratives of 'modernization' in which 'the West' provides the telos toward which all societies were in the process of moving," (Geschiere, P., 2008). Geschiere argued that "modernity" is usually a way of defining inequality in temporal terms." In the Arab world (the middle East), the introduction of modernity resulted in two divided futures and argued Di-Capua:

The first modern experiments in the Middle East envisioned a divided future in which the moral sphere would retain its authority and authenticity by remaining detached from the material sphere, the one governed by Islamic religious principles and the other by the modern secular state and its elites, (Di-Capua, Y., 54-74, 2015).

Thus, *Modern Times-A History of The Machine* with its complex visual lexicon demands aimed at the viewer forces the viewer to review modernity and challenge its implications in the Arab world.

2.2 SPEED CITY (2010)

is also a projection on the wall of calligraphy-Kufi Style on the shape of architecture. The calligraphic design takes the shape of urban architecture. The hinted architecture in the back resonates with an early Islamic art tradition that emerged in the

early Middle Ages in which calligraphy takes the shape of an image. Crutch best described Arabic calligraphy as “an amalgamation of the two-image and word-as it functions on both an aesthetic and a semantic level,” (Crutch, M., 2011). Fatmi applied this technique to a contemporary image of urban landscape with skyscrapers. The design serves Fatmi’s intention of conveying the fragile architecture. Fatmi stated that, fragility is an important aspect of his work in that he regards, specifically, architecture in the fast-growing cities of the Middle East as fragile. The notion of the fragility of urban cities echoes with the term ‘Cities of Salt,’ which has been used as a description of the fast growth of the petroleum cities as a side effect of industrialization, and was coined by Saudi critic and writer Munif. These cities are fragile, ephemeral and easily dissolved (Munif, A., 1987).

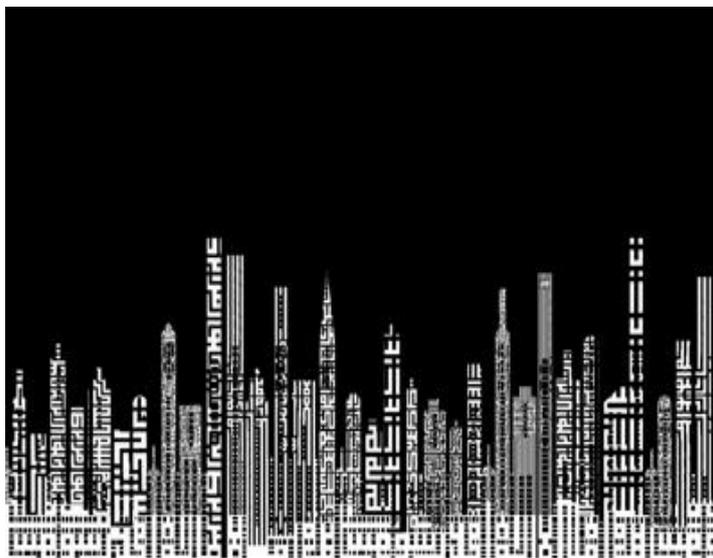


Fig. 2. *Speed City, 2010, France, video installation, 15 min, HD, B&W, stereo. Courtesy of the artist and Jane Lombard Gallery, New York © Adagp, Paris, 2021*

In *Speed City*, the machine is the material world, whereas, the calligraphy represents the humanistic aspect of this world. In this regard, we can read *Speed City* in terms of the impact of the global economy on creating the modern world and “to take account of the contribution to modernism of decolonization resistance culture, and the literature of opposition to imperialism,” (Said, W., 1994). In this regard, the calligraphy in itself represents the effort made by the colonized, while contributing to the building of the façade of the colonizer.

Coronil (1997) stated that it is important to examine societies who are very central and important to “the formation of what has been called the modern world and, yet, is casted as marginal to it.” (Coronil, 1997). He argued that we should reevaluate the history of capitalism and

conceptualize capitalism as a global process ... and view modernity... as an economic agent with its own base of economic power; and develop a dialectical approach that frees our understanding of history from teleological narratives locked in binary oppositions, opening a space for exploring the actions and potential solidarities of heterogeneous actors formed within increasingly interrelated material and cultural conditions. (Coronil, F., p. 388, 1997).

Similarly, Geschiere stated that “people in different world areas increasingly share aspirations, material standards and social institutions at the same time that their local definitions of and engagement with these initiatives fuels cultural distinctiveness,” (Geschiere, p. 2, 2008). Whether is the intention of the artist to evoke this new reading of modernity, *Speed City*, esthetically, is capable of delivering this notion and highlighting the point at which globalization can be read as a process in which it integrates forces and materials globally.

2.3 TECHNOLOGIA (2010)

is a video installation of ‘ancient circular Arabic calligraphy’ rendered in what seems to be inspired by Duchamp’s *Rotoreliefs* (1935). Duchamp called *Rotoreliefs* the ‘modern industrialized society’ and is considered among the first artists to comment on the modern, industrialized world, (Fatmi, M., 2015). We are also reminded of modernist painters Sonia and Robert Delauney

and Fernand Léger, (Rossiter, C., 2008). These painters used circular movements and geometry to cause their artwork to resemble the modern world.

The presence of Arabic calligraphy, a genre that has witnessed, as Ali argued, a continuity of Islamic art in contemporary art from the Middle East (Ali, W., 1997). It has also proven, through Fatmi's work, to have the capability to deliver a local visual vocabulary while being recognized as contemporary. The experimenting of modernism in the arts in the Arab world as Nuha N. N. Khoury argues involved nationalizing the arts from colonialism motives and techniques (Koury, N., 2015). Khoury further explained that "in North Africa and Sudan [nationalist sentiment into art] was often accompanied by the rejection of easel painting altogether and its replacement with local media and techniques," as an act of anti-colonialism. It is important to note that with the project of defensive modernism in the Arab world (Koury, N., 2015).

Morocco... went along with the replacement of oil paints by dyes, such as henna, and by the study of tattoo, weaving and jewelry design of local, Islamic, Arab and Imazighen (Berber) origin. Calligraphy, along with local practices and designs that art history usually classifies as "crafts," displaced the western art curriculum at the E'cole des Beaux Arts in Casablanca under artist-director Farid Belkahia in 1964," (Koury, N., p.202, 2015).

When looking at *Technologia*, one can find the material and spiritual references strongly present. Therefore, through examining Fatmi's art, a deliberate aesthetic language is conveyed within the presence of a contemporary subject matter. However, what makes Fatmi's art global is his continuations attempt at creating a dialogue between the West and East. This dialogue often accounts for authentic Arab art in relation to Western art history that makes dialogue possible in the eyes of the spectator. Artists from the Arab/Islamic world, such as Fatmi, are probably aware of the history and significance of the past. Di-Capua argued that, those individuals who are aware of the significance of the past, do not see any conflict between the spiritual and modern world for the simple reason that they reflect on the glory of the past (Di-Capua, Y., 2015). Consequently, the significance of understanding the history of the region is critical to.

By reflecting on Fatmi's works, a sense of frustration permeates his work. The two realms (i.e., spiritual and material), although aesthetically pleasing, intellectually are in rupture. This rupture can be understood by the struggle between the region and the West, and could, also, criticize the singular modernity advocated by the West. One aspect of this singular modernity is "the secularization of [the] modern society," (Appiah, A, 1992) Appiah argued:

Secularism seems hardly to be proceeding: religions grow in all parts of the world; more than 90% of North Americans still avow some sort of theism; what we call 'fundamentalism' is as live in the West as it is in Africa and the Middle and Far East. (Appiah, A, p. 145, 1992)

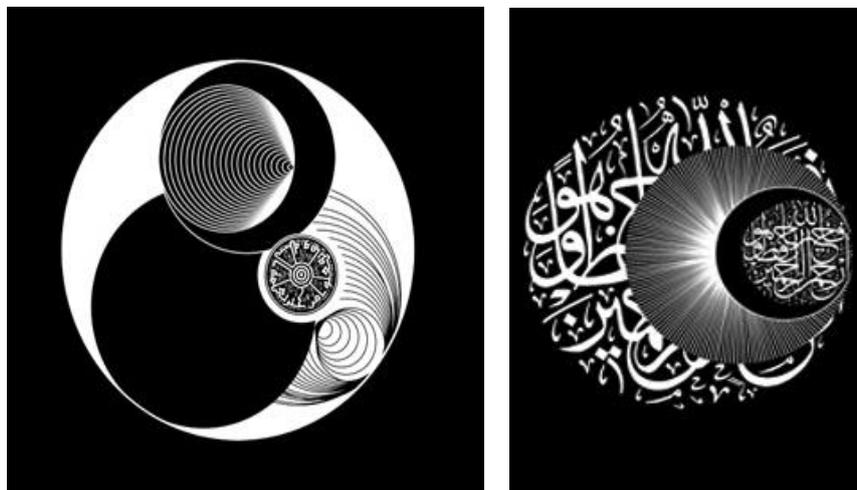


Fig. 3. *Technologia*, Mounir Fatmi, 2010, France, video installation, 15 min, SD, 4/3, B&W, stereo. Courtesy of the artist and Art Front Gallery, Tokyo © Adagp, Paris, 2021

Appiah further explained that, in the United States, what we see is not secularism or the end of religion, but rather its commodification. Commodification in this regard helps religions to grow even further. Moreover, I argue, that the use of the title, *technologia*, is a smart attempt for the reason of preventing the viewer to shift his attention to the Arabic world, is also used to force the reader to consider the complex relations of the East to the West, as well as reflect upon the introduction of technology into our modern lives.

3 CONCLUSION

This paper examines Mounir Fatmi's art works that deal with the representation of the machinery in relations to calligraphy. Gingras stated about Fatmi's art works: "we are inside a thinking machine in all its complexity," (Gingras, N., 2012). Thus, the paper argues that, by combining the blades and the hinted architecture imagery with that of calligraphy, Fatmi invites the viewer to examine the relationship between the modern West with the fast-growing East in a contemporary context. In addition, calligraphy, as a cultural heritage, can be traditional as well as contemporary. It also challenges the notion of modernization and how it can be understood in the Arab world.

Between *Modern Times-A History of The Machine* (2010), *Speed City* (2010), and *Technologia* (2010), two realms are conveyed (i.e., the spiritual and material realms). However, a sense of rupture between the two realms is present. I argue that, this rupture serves in opening a dialogue between the West and the East in regard to understanding modernity and its significant implications on each culture.

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